

Title: With a little help from my friends: Investigating the impact of summer peer mentoring on timely postsecondary attainment among college-intending high school graduates

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Background / Context:

The summer after high school graduation occupies a treasured place in American culture. Popular movies and music portray recent graduates spending lazy days on the beach and nervously anticipating first phone calls (or Facebook chats) with new roommates to plan what each should bring for the dorm room. But does this conception of the post-high school summer accurately capture the experience of low-income, college-intending high school graduates? Previous academic literature has documented the phenomenon of “summer fadeout,” where children, especially those from families with low incomes, may suffer achievement declines between the end of one school year and the start of the next one (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay & Greathouse, 1996; Entwistle, Alexander & Olson, 1997). Yet, prevailing psychological and sociological theories of college choice and retention neglect to consider any possibility of changes in plans during the summer after high school (cf. Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Tinto, 1993).

Even after students have been accepted to and have decided to attend college, however, successful matriculation is contingent on students completing a number of tasks during the summer, at a time when they no longer have access to high school guidance counselors and have yet to access support resources at their intended college. For instance, colleges typically require students to take placement tests and complete an abundance of paperwork, including housing and medical forms, over the summer months. Completing these tasks may be particularly daunting for low-income and first-generation college-bound students whose family members may lack experience with the college-going process. In addition, it is only in the summer after high school graduation when students must confront the reality of paying the first college term bill, which often includes unanticipated costs, such as required health insurance coverage. For college-intending students, successfully navigating the post-high school summer thus requires a level of financial and college literacy that may be unrelated to their ability to succeed in the classroom. As a result, students who have already surmounted many obstacles to college enrollment and who would potentially earn high returns to postsecondary education may, nonetheless, fail to matriculate.

In previous empirical work drawing on data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, we estimated a national summer attrition rate of approximately 10 percent overall, with higher rates among students of low socioeconomic status (Authors, 2011). These findings are consistent with descriptive evidence from the Chicago Public Schools (Roderick et al, 2008) and from qualitative interviews indicating that low-income students especially struggle with evaluating financial aid offers and completing all necessary requirements to enroll after paying a deposit to a particular college in the spring (Authors, 2009).

Motivated by these empirical results, we conducted a pilot experimental study of summer college counseling for students in a network of innovative high schools in Providence, RI (Authors, 2012). The results were quite striking: treatment group students (who were explicitly offered summer assistance from their high school counselors) were 14 percentage points more likely to enroll immediately in college than students in the control group. Despite the pilot study’s small sample size, these effects were large enough to achieve statistical significance. In addition, the cost of summer counseling in this pilot study was less than \$200 per student, suggesting that

summer support may be a cost-effective intervention for promoting college enrollment among low-income students.⁵

In two follow-up larger-scale randomized trials, we investigated whether summer counseling can increase college enrollment rates among high school graduates from large urban public school districts (Authors 2012). As with the pilot study, the cost of summer outreach and counseling was about \$100 – \$200 per student. Across the sites, the offer of summer counseling increased the probability of fall college enrollment by a statistically and practically significant margin of nearly four percentage points. These impacts persisted into the spring semester, suggesting that summer support can promote more stable enrollment beyond the first semester. In one site, where we were able to observe student-level free/reduced price lunch status (FRL), summer outreach and the offer of support increased immediate enrollment by approximately eight percentage points among FRL students, suggesting that summer outreach and support may be particularly beneficial among college-intending students from low-income backgrounds.

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:

Results from the interventions discussed above indicate that offering summer support is a cost-effective approach to increasing college enrollment meaningfully among low-income students. Nevertheless, several questions remain regarding how summer outreach and counseling could be conducted most efficiently and effectively. For example, would students be more responsive to outreach from college staff members or from college-aged peers? While students do not have a prior relationship with college staff, they may be more inclined to respond and engage with college staff members because the outreach is coming from the institution where the student has indicated a desire to attend. The focus of this paper is on investigating the impact of summer support provided by college-aged peer mentors on timely college matriculation among recent high school graduates with articulated college plans. Outreach from peer mentors is a more cost-effective strategy than outreach from professional counselors, and we hypothesize that students may be particularly likely to respond to college peers to whom they may feel they can better relate.

Setting:

Through this intervention, peer mentors provided outreach and support to students in four distinct locations: the public school districts in Boston, Lawrence and Springfield (Massachusetts) and a network of charter schools in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. The peer mentors in the Massachusetts sites were recruited, hired and supervised by uAspire, a non-profit organization focused on issues of college affordability and financial aid. Peer mentors conducted outreach from the uAspire offices in the respective cities and interacted with focal students in person in these offices as well as via other technologies such as phone, Facebook, text message and email. The peer mentors in Philadelphia were recruited and hired by Mastery Charter Schools and were designated to serve recent graduates from one of the five Mastery high schools. These peer mentors were supervised by counseling staff in each of the five high schools. As in the Massachusetts sites, communication with students occurred in person as well as via a variety of technologies.

⁵ By comparison, the financial aid literature has consistently found that \$1,000 in need-based grant aid increases enrollment by 3 – 6 percentage points (Dynarski, 2003; Kane, 2003).

Population / Participants / Subjects:

Across the sites, 20 peer mentors provided proactive outreach and the offer of support to 907 students randomly selected from a totally sample of 2,209 students. Peer mentors were allocated caseloads of 35 to 50 students each. In Philadelphia, focal students were Class of 2012 graduates from a Mastery high school. In the other sites, focal students were high school seniors (most of whom graduated in the spring of 2012) who had received college financial aid advising and support from a uAspire advisor during the course of the academic year.

Nearly the entire sample of students from the Mastery Charter Schools is black. More than half (56 percent) are female, and 65 percent are eligible for free / reduced price school meals. Of these students, 42 percent reported intentions to enroll in a two-year institution (with the remainder intending on a four-year institution) and approximately one-quarter reported intentions to enroll in a private college or university.

Across the three Massachusetts sites, approximately one-third of students are black, one-third are Hispanic, and approximately seven percent are white. Similar to the Mastery sample, 60 percent of students from these sites are female, and a higher 78 percent qualify for free / reduced price meals.⁶ Of those students with specifically articulated postsecondary plans, 36 percent reported intentions to enroll in a two-year college or trade program, 27 percent to enroll in a four-year public institution, and 37 percent to enroll in a four-year private institution.

Intervention / Program / Practice:

As noted above, peer mentors were each allocated caseloads of students identified as college-intending, based on high school exit surveys and other information-gathering tools utilized by the partnering organizations. Peer mentors proactively reached out to each student in his or her caseload to provide encouragement, support and information related to college going. During initial outreach, peer mentors inquired about several typical summer tasks related to fall college matriculation, such as logging onto one's college web portal, completing placement exams, and registering for orientation. Peer mentors then offered to meet with students in person or to communicate with students via other technologies in order to identify and provide needed supports. For student who took up the offer to meet with a peer mentor, the first meeting consisted of a checklist-guided conversation of the student's readiness for fall college matriculation and the generation of a to-do list for the student to organize for and accomplish summer tasks required for fall matriculation. Peer mentors conducted regular follow up with each student and held additional meetings with students throughout the summer, as needed. Peer mentors actively conducted outreach to students from the end of June to the middle of August during the summer of 2012. Where students required assistance that was beyond the purview of the peer mentors – such as when students and their families required assistance completing the FAFSA or negotiating a difficult financial situation or decision – peer mentors referred students to meet with a supervising, professional advisor.

Research Design:

We will evaluate the impact of the peer mentor outreach on timely college matriculation and other college-going outcomes using a randomized control trial design. In each of the four sites

⁶ Although in the MA data, we are missing information on free / reduced price lunch status for 18 percent of the sample.

included in this evaluation, students were selected to receive proactive peer mentor outreach by lottery. Given this design, we are able to assess the causal impact of being targeted for peer mentor outreach and support on a set of college-going outcomes.

Students not identified for outreach received the standard level of support provided to students by uAspire or the Mastery high school in cases where the student sought such support. No control group student in the study sample was denied support because of the intervention.

Data Collection and Analysis:

We will rely on three primary sources of data to describe the intervention and to evaluate its impact on college-going outcomes. First, we capitalize on administrative records from the partnering organizations. These records include background characteristics of the sample students as well as information on their postsecondary intentions. Second, peer mentors (and their supporting professional counselors and advisors) collected data on their interactions with students throughout the summer. In these interaction logs, peer mentors and advisors collected information on the success of their outreach efforts, the modes of communication utilized and the types of assistance they provided to students and families. Finally, we will link data from these sources to college enrollment data obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). The NSC data on timing and institution of postsecondary enrollment will provide our primary outcome data of interest. Given the experimental design of our study, we will utilize straightforward regression analyses for analyzing our data and assessing treatment impacts.

Findings / Results:

We are currently gathering data from each of the partner sites for the purpose of describing implementation, and we will obtain the NSC outcome data by December. Nevertheless, across the Massachusetts sites (for which we have already obtained interaction log data), we find that peer mentors successfully made contact with approximately 50 percent of treatment group students, compared to the five percent of control group students who had contact with peer mentors or advisors over the summer months. This provides a preliminary indication that we were successful at increasing the college-going outreach that students experienced over the summer months.

Conclusions:

Our summer counseling interventions to date have provided evidence that outreach and the offer of support in the months after high school graduation positively impact timely college going among college-intending high school graduates. A fuller description of conclusions and recommendations associated with peer mentors as an outreach model relies on postsecondary enrollment data which we anticipate receiving by December. Positive impacts of the peer mentoring campaign on rates of college enrollment and persistence will have important implications for steps that secondary and post-secondary institutions can take to improve college-going rates with modest effort and low cost by employing current college students to support the timely matriculation of their near-aged college-intending peers.

Appendices

Appendix A. References

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